

Pipeline rules target accountability, safety

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Regulators approved tougher rules Tuesday aimed at making natural-gas and gasoline pipelines safer and their operators more accountable.

The rules are expected to lead to fewer pipeline breaks and less risk of personal injury or property damage. The rules do not apply to either of the two federally regulated gasoline pipelines entering the state from California and Texas but do apply to gasoline lines operating entirely within the state's borders.

"This is an important step forward in pipeline safety," Arizona Corporation Commissioner Kris Mayes said.

The rules require many pipeline operators to report accidents and breaks to the state immediately after they are discovered. In the past, some accidents have gone unreported for days. They also give regulators the authority to order independent tests when the cause of an accident or break is not immediately apparent.

The improved standards stemmed from the ruptured line in July 2003 that spewed an estimated 32,000 gallons of gasoline on the nearby new-home subdivision.

The break in the El Paso-to-Phoenix pipeline operated by Kinder Morgan Energy Partners closed a key gasoline supply line for 17 days causing shortages and exorbitant prices in some areas.

"The Kinder Morgan incident really lit a fire under us," Commissioner Mike Gleason said.

The rules also adopt stricter federal standards for pipelines near buildings. They require buildings located over pipelines to be removed or the pipeline relocated.

Existing Arizona laws also require operators of pipelines within 50 feet of developments to either dig them up and bury them a foot deeper or add a foot of soil on top.

The lines are now buried a minimum of 30 to 48 inches below the surface.

The commissioners acknowledged the standards for pipelines near building is a move in the right direction, but that the encroachment of new buildings on existing pipelines is a huge problem with complex solutions.

That could involve working with zoning administrators in counties and municipalities to develop rules that govern new developments near pipelines. When the Kinder Morgan pipeline broke near Tucson, it doused several new homes under construction nearby with gasoline.

That line is not covered under these regulations.

Kinder Morgan's line from El Paso to Phoenix and its line from Los Angeles to Phoenix are classified as Interstate pipelines and come under the supervision of the federal Office of Pipeline Safety.

The rules adopted by the commission on Tuesday affect only instate pipeline systems that are regulated by the Corporation Commission's Pipeline Safety Division.

Those include lines operated by Southwest Gas Corp., which provides natural gas to about 827,000 Arizona customers.